Tom Wolfe: The Astronauts' Remorse

IND 34145

ROLLING STONE

February 15, 1973 60¢ UK 20p Issue No. 128

Hunter S. Thompson at the Superbowl Hell's Angels' Day in Court Stones' Coast Concert

The Gold Lamé Dream of Bette Midler

PHILIP HAYS

FEAR AND LOATHING AT THE SUPERBOWL: NO REST FOR THE WRETCHED... STROBE NOTES AND STRANGE MEMORIES ON A DREARY WEEKEND IN LOS ANGELES

by Hunter S. Thompson

When the Great Scorer comes to write against your name
He won't ask whether you Won or Lost
But how you played The Game.
—Grantland Rice: who was known—prior to his death in the late Fifties—as "The Dean of American Sportswriters."

They came together on a hot afternoon in Los Angeles, howling and clawing at each other like wild beasts in heat.

Under a brown California sky, the fierceness of their struggle brought tears to the eyes of 90,000 God-fearing fans.

They were 22 men who were somehow more than men.

They were giants, idols, titans. . . .

Behemoths.

They stood for everything Good and True and Right in the American Spirit.

Because they had guts.

And they yearned for the Ultimate Glory, the Great Prize, the Final Fruits of a long and vicious campaign.

Victory in the Super Bowl: $15,000 each.

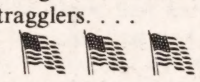
They were hungry for it. They were thirsty. For 20 long weeks, from August through December, they had struggled to reach this Pinnacle . . . and when dawn lit the beaches of Southern California on that fateful Sunday morning in January, they were ready.

To seize the Final Fruit.

They could almost taste it. The smell was stronger than a ton of rotten mangoes. Their nerves burned like open sores on a dog's neck. White knuckles. Wild eyes. Strange fluid welled up in their throats, with a taste far sharper than bile.

Behemoths.

Those who went early said the pregame tension was almost unbearable. By noon, many fans were weeping openly, for no apparent reason. Others wrung their hands or gnawed on the necks of pop bottles, trying to stay calm. Many fist-fights were reported in the public urinals. Nervous ushers roamed up and down the aisles, confiscating alcoholic beverages and occasionally grappling with drunkards. Gangs of Seconal-crazed teenagers prowled through the parking lot outside the stadium, beating the mortal shit out of luckless stragglers. . . .



What? No. . . . Grantland Rice would never have written weird stuff like that: His prose was spare & lean; his descriptions came straight from the gut . . . and on the rare and ill-advised occasions when he wanted to do a "Think Piece," he called on the analytical powers of his medulla. Like all great sportswriters, Rice understood that his world might go all to pieces if he ever dared to doubt that his eyes were wired straight to his lower brain—a sort of de facto lobotomy, which enables the grinning victim to operate entirely on the level of Sensory Perception. . . .

Green grass, hot sun, sharp cleats in the turf, thundering cheers from the crowd, the menacing scowl on the face of a $30,000-a-year pulling guard as he leans around the corner on a Lombardi-style power sweep and cracks a sharp plastic shoulder into the linebacker's groin. . . .

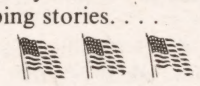
Ah yes, the simple life: Back to the roots, the basics—first a Mousetrap, then a Crackback & a Buttonhook off a fake triple-reverse Fly Pattern, and finally The Bomb. . . .

Indeed. There is a dangerous kind of simple-minded Power/Precision worship at the root of the massive fascination with pro football in this country, and sportswriters are mainly responsible for it. With a few rare exceptions like Bob Lipsyte of The New York Times and Tom Quinn of the (now-defunct) Washington Daily News, sportswriters are a kind of rude and brainless subculture of fascist drunks whose only real function is to publicize & sell whatever the sports editor sends them out to cover. . . .

Which is a nice way to make a living, because it keeps a man busy and requires no thought at all. The two keys to success as a sportswriter are: 1) A blind willingness to believe anything you're told by the coaches, flacks, hustlers and other "official spokesmen" for the team-owners who provide the free booze . . . and: 2) A Roget's Thesaurus, in order to avoid using the same verbs and adjectives twice in the same paragraph.

Even a sports editor, for instance, might notice something wrong with a lead that said: "The precision-jackhammer attack of the Miami Dolphins stomped the balls off the Washington Redskins today by stomping and hammering with one precise jack-thrust after another up the middle, mixed with pinpoint-precision passes into the flat and numerous hammer-jack stomps around both ends. . . . "

Right. And there was the genius of Grantland Rice. He carried a pocket thesaurus, so that "The thundering hoofbeats of the Four Horsemen" never echoed more than once in the same paragraph, and the "Granite-grey sky" in his lead was a "cold dark dusk" in the last lonely line of his heart-rending, nerve-ripping stories. . . .



There was a time, about ten years ago, when I could write like Grantland Rice. Not necessarily because I believed all that sporty bullshit, but because sportswriting was the only thing I could do that anybody was willing to pay for. And none of the people I wrote about seemed to give a hoot in hell what kind of lunatic gibberish I wrote about them, just as long as it *moved.* They wanted Action, Color, Speed, Violence. . . . At one point, in Florida, I was writing variations on the same demented themes for three competing papers at the same time, under three different names. I was a sports columnist for one paper in the morning, sports editor for another in the afternoon, and at night I worked for a pro wrestling promoter, writing incredibly twisted "press releases" that I would plant, the next day, in both papers.

It was a wonderful gig, in retrospect, and at times I wish I could go back to it—just punch a big hatpin through my frontal lobes and maybe regain that happy lost innocence that enabled me to write, without the slightest twinge of conscience, things like: "The entire Fort Walton Beach police force is gripped in a state of fear this week; all leaves have been canceled and Chief Bloor is said to be drilling his men for an Emergency Alert situation on Friday and Saturday nights—because those are the nights when 'Kazika, The Mad Jap,' a 440-pound sadist from the vile slums of Hiroshima, is scheduled to make his first—and no doubt his last—appearance in Fish-head Auditorium. Local wrestling impressario Lionel Olay is known to have spoken privately with Chief Bloor, urging him to have 'every available officer' on duty at ringside this weekend, because of the Mad Jap's legendary temper and his invariably savage reaction to racial insults. Last week, in Detroit, Kazika ran amok and tore the spleens out of three ringside spectators, one of whom allegedly called him a 'yellow devil.' "

"Kazika," as I recall, was a big, half-bright Cuban who once played third-string tackle for Florida State University in Tallahassee, about 100 miles away—but on the fish-head circuit he had no trouble passing for a dangerous Jap strangler, and I soon learned that pro wrestling fans don't give a fuck anyway.

Ah . . . memories, memories . . . and here we go again, back on the same old trip: Digressions, tangents, crude flashbacks. . . . When the '72 presidential campaign ended I planned to give up this kind of thing. . . .

But what the hell? Why not? It's almost dawn in San Francisco now, the parking lot outside this building is flooded about three inches deep with another drenching rain, and I've been here all night drinking coffee & Wild Turkey, smoking short Jamaican cigars and getting more & more wired on the Allman Brothers' "Mountain Jam," howling out of four big speakers hung in all four corners of the room.

Where is the MDA? With the windows wide open and the curtains blowing into the room and the booze and the coffee and the smoke and the music beating heavy in my ears, I feel the first rising edge of a hunger for something with a bit of the crank in it.

Where is Mankiewicz tonight?

Sleeping peacefully?

No. . . . probably not. After two years on The Edge, involuntary retirement is a hard thing to cope with. I tried it for a while, in Woody Creek, but three weeks without even a hit of crisis left me so nervous that I began gobbling speed and babbling distractedly about running for the US Senate in '74. Finally, on the verge of desperation, I took the bush-plane over to Denver for a visit with Gary Hart, McGovern's ex-campaign manager, telling him I couldn't actually put him on the payroll right now, but that I was counting on him to organize Denver for me.

He smiled crookedly, but refused to commit himself . . . and later that night I heard, from an extremely reliable source, that Hart was planning to run for the Senate, himself, in 1974.

Why? I wondered. Was it some kind of subliminal, un-focused need to take vengeance on the press?

On *me?* The first journalist in Christendom to go on record comparing Nixon to Adolph Hitler?

Was Gary so blinded with bile that he would actually run against me in The Primary? Would he risk splitting the "Three A's" vote and maybe sink us both?

I spent about 24 hours thinking about it, then flew to Los Angeles to cover the Super Bowl—but the first person I ran into down there was Ed Muskie. He was wandering around in the vortex of a big party on the main deck of the Queen Mary, telling anybody who would listen that he was having a hell of a hard time deciding whether he was for the Dolphins or the Redskins. I introduced myself as Peter Sheridan, "a friend of Donald Segretti's." "We met on the Sunshine Special in Florida," I said. "I was out of my head. . . ." But his brain was too clouded to pick up on it . . . so I went up to the crow's nest and split a cap of black acid with John Chancellor.

He was reluctant to bet on the game, even when I offered to take Miami with no points. A week earlier I'd been locked into the idea that the Redskins would win easily—but when Nixon came out for them and George Allen began televising his prayer meetings I decided that any team with both God and Nixon on their side was fucked from the start.

So I began betting heavily on Miami—which worked out nicely, on paper, but some of my heaviest bets were with cocaine addicts, and they are known to be very bad risks when it comes to paying off. Most coke freaks have already blown their memories by years of over-indulgence on marijuana, and by the time they get serious about coke they have a hard time remembering what day it is, much less what kind of ill-considered bets they might or might not have made yesterday.

Consequently—although I won all my bets—I made no money.

The game itself was hopelessly dull—like all the other Super Bowls—and by half time Miami was so clearly in command that I decided to watch the rest of the drill on TV at Cardoso's Hollywood Classic/Day of the Locust-style apartment behind the Troubadour . . . but it was impossible to keep a fix on it there, because everybody in the room was so stoned that they kept asking each other things like "How did Miami get the ball? Did we miss a kick? Who's ahead now? Jesus, how did they get 14 points? How many points is . . . ah . . . *touchdown?"*

Immediately after the game I received an urgent call from my attorney, who claimed to be having a terminal drug experience in his private bungalow at the Chateau Marmont . . . but by the time I got there he had finished the whole jar.

Later, when the big rain started, I got heavily into the gin and read the Sunday papers. On page 39 of California Living magazine I found a hand-lettered ad from the McDonald's Hamburger Corporation, one of Nixon's big contributors in the '72 presidential campaign:

PRESS ON, it said. NOTHING IN THE WORLD CAN TAKE THE PLACE OF PERSISTENCE. TALENT WILL NOT: NOTHING IS MORE COMMON THAN UNSUCCESSFUL MEN WITH TALENT. GENIUS WILL NOT: UNREWARDED GENIUS IS ALMOST A PROVERB. EDUCATION ALONE WILL NOT: THE WORLD IS FULL OF EDUCATED DERELICTS. PERSISTENCE AND DETERMINATION ALONE ARE OMNIPOTENT.

I read it several times before I grasped the full meaning. Then, when it came to me, I called Mankiewicz immediately.

"Keep your own counsel," he said "Don't draw any conclusions from anything you see or hear."

I hung up and drank some more gin. Then I put a Dolly Parton album on the tape machine and watched the trees outside my balcony getting lashed around in the wind. Around midnight, when the rain stopped, I put on my special Miami Beach nightshirt and walked several blocks down La Cienaga Boulevard to the Loser's Club.

Editor's Note: After long, heavy and occasionally brutal negotiations, Dr. Thompson is back on the payroll. His gibberish will appear irregularly and at unpredictable lengths on a wide variety of subject matter. We have total confidence in him—for good or ill.